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ABSTRACT

This guide is designed to sensitize both the novice and experienced teacher to the problems Vietnamese students are likely to have in learning the grammatical structures of English. The guidelines and suggestions presented here relate principally to the structures of English which differ markedly from parallel structures of Vietnamese, and which therefore are especially difficult for Vietnamese students. Among the areas discussed are suffixes, the plural -s, the possessive -s, the -er comparative and -est superlative, -ly adverbs, -ing forms used as nouns, -ing forms used as adjectives, tenses, "be" sentences, questions, negatives, and articles. The bulletin also includes a section on adapting English textbooks to meet the needs of Vietnamese students, as well as a listing of useful reference books on both the English and Vietnamese languages. (DB)

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GENERAL INFORMATION SERIES: Teaching English Structures to the Vietnamese

I. Introduction

Along with learning what English words mean and how to pronounce them, the Vietnamese student must also directly learn how to combine them to produce sentences which express what he wants to say. Teaching this aspect of English (called English syntax by some, and English grammar by others) is a prospect which strikes fear into the heart of the average American: he equates it with the grammar lessons he had in grade school, and therefore thinks that he is going to be called upon to talk about nouns, verbs, relative clauses, appositives and all the other features of grammar he has happily forgotten since leaving school. Often, the teacher whose job it is to teach syntax to his Vietnamese students is so frightened by the undertaking that he contents himself with teaching just vocabulary and pronunciation, and assuming (or hoping!) that the student will "pick up" the grammar on his own.

Assuming that the student will "pick up" the grammar of English without being taught it, however, is like assuming that the math student will "pick up" the ability to derive square roots simply by being exposed to numbers and their square roots; or that the music student will "pick up" the ability to read music simply by following a score as he listens to music being played. The structures of English sentences (which is what grammar or syntax is really all about) are complicated pieces of business; it is one of the major miracles of being human that we all manage, as small children, to master these structures simply by hearing other people use them.

This uniquely human capacity - to learn the complexities of language long before we are ready to tackle the complexities of math or music or anything else, and to learn them simply by hearing them used - seems to dry up as we get older; as a consequence, once we are past the age of five or six, we have to

be directly taught the structures of a foreign language if we want to learn it.

The Vietnamese student of English past the age of five or six, then, is in precisely the same position as the American student taking French or Spanish; just as no one expects the American high school student to master French just by learning vocabulary words and their pronunciation, so the Vietnamese student cannot be expected to learn English just by learning words and sounds.

So what happens to the average Vietnamese student who is not taught English grammar directly? When such a student sets about expressing a particular idea in English, he (roughly!) gets together the vocabulary items he needs, then strings them together in an arrangement which he hopes will express the relationships among them. In the absence of a firm knowledge of how words in English are grouped to form sentences, he will arrange them in a way which seems natural to him, i.e. the way they are arranged in Vietnamese. The result either will or will not communicate what he wants to say, depending on how close it comes to the English sentence we actually say.

To give you a better idea of what the previous paragraph is trying to get across, let's reverse the situation. Listed below are several vocabulary items in Vietnamese, with their English equivalents. Try to arrange these items in a sentence which expresses the idea "What shall I do when I finish eating?"

(This is important; now get out a piece of paper and construct a sentence!)

ăn 'eat'	phải 'do'
gì 'what'	sau 'after'
khi 'time'	tôi 'I'
làm 'do'	xong 'finish'

(If you can't find a piece of paper, write it on the line below.)

Chances are, you came up with something roughly like

Gì phải tôi làm sau khi tôi xong ăn?

And if you said this sentence - even with flawless pronunciation - to a Vietnamese, he would respond with polite confusion; he would not understand it, because it deviates radically from the actual Vietnamese sentence, which is

Tôi phải làm gì sau khi tôi ăn xong?

What you did was to arrange the vocabulary items in an order which seemed "natural", and that order corresponds to the order of elements in English - or perhaps another language you know; there was no way for you to know how the words are arranged in Vietnamese, because no one has taught you.

The Vietnamese learner of English who is not taught English grammar, and who is consequently forced to rely on his notions of what is natural and what isn't, will come up with sentences which are as ungrammatical in English as yours was in Vietnamese. Sometimes these "pidgin" English sentences will get his meaning across, and sometimes they won't. Context helps: you will have no trouble understanding a Vietnamese student's "House burn!" if smoke is pouring out of the windows of the building behind him. There are also some simple sentence patterns which translate nearly word for word between Vietnamese and English, like "I eat" and "Horse eat grass". And there are sentences which the Vietnamese student in an English-speaking classroom simply cannot avoid learning by rote: the elementary school teacher on our staff suggests "Do you have your lunch money?" and "Where's your pencil?" as examples.

One way or another, being in an English-speaking environment will force the student to learn to communicate pretty well on a general level; but unless he is taught the structures of English, he will in all probability never achieve the precision necessary to understand and express complex ideas. (He is unlikely, for example, to be able to figure out that the sentence If Sam had known the answers he would have passed the exam really means that Sam didn't pass the exam, if he has never been taught the peculiar way in which we juggle tenses to produce conditional sentences.)

Without the ability to express precisely what he wants to say, the student will be severely handicapped whenever he tries to go beyond general conversation. He will have difficulty understanding his textbooks even if he knows the vocabulary. For example, the following highly complex sentence

was taken from a third-grade text: "In all the colonial communities, people had to decide how they could use their resources to help them get what they needed." The student will have even more difficulty trying to express himself in writing.

In short, he will be limited - probably for the rest of his life - to areas of endeavor in which precise communication is not important. He can aspire to being a gardener or carpenter with some hope of success, but he can't hope to be a historian or a doctor. Many of the refugee children are better equipped, by family background, natural ability and interest, to be historians and doctors; these children should not have their options limited by their inability to speak English.

All of which brings us right back to the initial problem: the average American is not equipped to teach English grammar. (Nor should he be, any more than he should be equipped to teach American lit or third grade social studies.) But fortunately for everyone involved, teaching English grammar to speakers of Vietnamese or Khmer or any other language is a completely different undertaking from teaching grammar to native speakers of English. In fact, grammar as we think of it is not taught at all.

Specialists in the ESL field (ESL = English as a Second Language) are generally agreed that learning a new language by memorizing rules of grammar ("A noun is the name of a person, place or thing") is not a particularly efficient way to proceed. They prefer, instead, an approach in which the student learns the language by speaking it; this approach, called the audio-lingual method, involves different types of drills in which the student repeats a particular sentence pattern over and over until it comes naturally to him, and he can use it to express ideas of his own. In the audio-lingual method, the student is never directly taught, for example, that English has two demonstrative pronouns, each of which must be inflected for plural; instead, he is shown - with books and appropriate gestures - the difference in meaning among the sentences This is a book, These are books, That's a book, and Those are books, and then drilled in these sentences (using other nouns like pencil, door, map, chair and so on) until the proper use of this, that, these and those is second nature to him.

The teacher operating within the audio-lingual method needs only to know the difference in meaning among the four sentences above to teach a student how to use this, that, these and those; he does not need to know that they are demonstrative pronouns, or be able to give reasons for the way they are used. Now any native speaker of English knows the differences in meaning among those four sentences; it follows, then, that any native speaker of English has the knowledge of his language necessary to teach it to others.

This is not to say that any native speaker can step right in and teach English off the top of his head. There are some aspects of English as a Second Language which are the province of the linguist or grammarian, and which should be left to him. The grammarian is aware, first, of certain features of English which the average native speaker has never had occasion to notice, but which have to be taught directly to the foreign student learning English. (There are certain verbs, for example, which can't be used in the present progressive tense - I am knowing the rules of pinochle sounds decidedly odd; the grammarian knows which verbs these are, and can group them together to be taught in a single lesson.)

Another aspect of ESL is sequencing of materials, or determining the order in which the structures of English should be taught. It makes basic sense to teach simpler structures before more complicated ones, but it is very difficult to decide which structures are simpler than which other ones. The linguist or grammarian is in a much better position to judge the relative difficulty of a particular structure than the man in the street.

These aspects of ESL - the isolation of structures and their sequencing - can, and have been, built into special textbooks teaching English as a Second Language. The native speaker of English can equip himself and his students with one of these textbooks and proceed to teach, secure in the knowledge that the text will take care of the aspects of English teaching that he can't handle, and that the rest is well within his capabilities as a native speaker of English.

Many of these special ESL textbooks are accompanied by Teachers' Manuals specifically written for the native speaker with no special training. Linguists and educators in the ESL field are aware that more often than not the

ESL teacher is inexperienced, and have devoted a great deal of attention to providing him with materials which enable him to teach effectively despite his lack of background. The teachers' manuals for many ESL books, therefore, go into great detail on such matters as the different kinds of drills, ways of setting up ESL classes, procedures for teaching vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar, and background information on the language itself.

The Center for Applied Linguistics' A Selected, Annotated Bibliography for Teaching English to Speakers of Vietnamese* lists many ESL texts, with those specifically designed to be used by inexperienced teachers pointed out; and the National Indochinese Clearinghouse General Information Bulletin #5 (Teaching English to the Vietnamese: Textbooks) gives more information and general guidelines for choosing a text.

II. Adapting a Text for Vietnamese Students

Most of the commercially available textbooks are designed to be used with students regardless of their native language. This is possible because, first, one of the features of the audio-lingual method mentioned earlier is the exclusion of translation as a teaching device; ideally, instruction should be entirely in English. (Even texts specially written for students with a particular language background do not, as a rule, have the native language incorporated into the lessons themselves.) Second, English is English, whatever the native language of the students, so the contents of a text will be the same whether it is being used with Vietnamese, Cambodians, Dutchmen or Turks.

While the structures of English don't vary with the language background of the student, it is a well-established fact that the English structures a student will find difficult or easy by and large correlate with the structures of his native language. An example: The Vietnamese student of English will have difficulty remembering to put the plural s on English nouns, because in Vietnamese the plural is not marked with a suffix; on the other hand, he will have no trouble at all with the English order of subject, then verb, then

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* See also GENERAL INFORMATION SERIES #12: Selected Annotated Bibliography for Teaching English to Speakers of Vietnamese and Cambodian: A Supplement.

object, because in Vietnamese the order of subject, verb and object is the same.

Textbooks designed for students regardless of background give more or less equal attention to all of the structures of English, with the understanding that the teacher will skip quickly over those lessons dealing with areas the students find easy, and concentrate on those lessons the students find more difficult.

The teacher of Vietnamese students can tell in advance which lessons will be difficult for his students by comparing the structure taught in a lesson with the parallel structure in Vietnamese (i.e. the structure that gets the same idea across). If the structures are roughly the same, the students will probably find the lesson quite easy, and will not need too much work on it; if the structures are quite different, the students will probably find the lesson hard, and will require more drill to start with, as well as several review sessions.

It is not necessary to speak Vietnamese to compare it with English; simply knowing that, for example, in Vietnamese the word order for questions is the same as the word order for declarative sentences is enough for the teacher to predict that his students will have trouble with English questions like Is that a goldfish? in which the word order differs from that in the corresponding declarative sentence That is a goldfish.

The major purpose of this bulletin is to point out the structures of English which differ markedly from parallel structures of Vietnamese, and which therefore are especially difficult for Vietnamese students learning English. These will be the structures that will require extra work from the outset, as well as more review sessions. The Vietnamese student will "naturally" say, for example, Here is a pencil when he means "Here are the pencils." When we compare his sentence with the corresponding sentence in Vietnamese:

Đây là viết chì

'here' 'is' 'pencil'

the source of his mistake is immediately obvious: there is no plural suffix in Vietnamese, and the sentence above is used regardless of the number of pencils involved. (Note that the lack of an overt distinction between

singular and plural in Vietnamese does not by any means prevent its speakers from distinguishing between one and more-than-one -- as the performance of your Vietnamese student in his math class shows!) Even after he has been taught to put the plural -s on nouns, the Vietnamese student will frequently forget to do so, especially if he is tired, pre-occupied, or concentrating hard on what he is saying rather than how he is saying it.

The rest of this bulletin is devoted to describing the structures of English which cause special and particular trouble for the Vietnamese learner of English. One by one the structures are compared with their Vietnamese counterparts, and the differences between them are pointed out. All of this involves grammatical explanation which gets terribly tedious (even - and especially - the author thinks so), but once you have waded through it, you will be in a much better position to anticipate, recognize, and understand the grammatical mistakes your students make. And this, in turn, will enable you to make much more efficient and effective use of your classroom time.

In choosing structures to discuss, we have focussed on just those which are difficult for the Vietnamese student in particular. We have not discussed such problems as irregular verbs like sink (sank, sunk instead of sinked, sinked) because they are inconsistencies in the grammar of English per se, and not problems which are due to differences between Vietnamese and English. Because everyone learning English (including native-speaking toddlers!) has trouble with such things, ESL texts devote a good deal of attention to them, and so you will generally not have to worry about them.

To keep the bulletin down to a readable length, we have dealt only with the structures that occur in simple sentences. It is in simple sentences that the worst problems occur, anyway: it never seems to be the intricacies of complex sentences that plague the student, it's the picky little details like plurals that make his life difficult. (Besides, we have occasionally cheated, and included a structure that by rights involves complex constructions.)

III. Specific Areas of Difficulty for Vietnamese Learning English

A. Suffixes

There are no suffixes in Vietnamese; as a consequence, the Vietnamese

learner of English will probably have trouble remembering to attach the necessary suffixes to English words.

We are not talking here about what linguists call derivational suffixes. Derivational suffixes like -ion (attention), -ive (attentive), and -ant (attendant), do not combine freely with all words (note that while -ion will go on intend to produce intention, neither -ive nor -ant will: intendive and intendant are not English words); the Vietnamese student, and the native English speaker, for that matter, learns these suffixes as part of individual vocabulary items, and only later - if at all - notices the relationship between, say, attend, attention, attentive and attendant (a relationship which generally has to do with the historical origins of the words).

The suffixes we are talking about are what linguists call inflectional suffixes. These are suffixes which, first, play an important role in the grammar of English, and which, second, combine freely with all words of a certain class (like nouns or verbs). Because of their grammatical role and the frequency of their occurrence, these suffixes are important for the Vietnamese student to master. Fortunately, English has only a handful of inflectional suffixes; they are discussed one by one below.

The plural -s English regularly forms the plural of a noun by adding -s (actually, the plural suffix is pronounced either -s, -z, or something approximating -iz, depending on what the sound that immediately precedes the suffix is): whenever we want to talk about more than one book, for example, we must add s to get books, and talk of three books, a carload of books, books on pinochle, and so on. As we mentioned before, Vietnamese has no plural suffix; as the following sentences illustrate, the form of the noun (in this case the noun sách 'book') remains the same, and the number of the noun is indicated by other words in the sentences.

Tôi cần sách. 'I need books.'
'I' 'need' 'book'

Tôi cần một cuốn sách. 'I need a book.'
'I' 'need' 'one' 'piece' 'book'

Tôi cần ba cuốn sách. 'I need three books.'
'I' 'need' '3' 'piece' 'book'

Tôi cần vài cuốn sách. 'I need a few books.'
'I' 'need' 'few' 'piece' 'book'

The difficulty the Vietnamese student has with the plural -s is compounded by the fact that neither s nor z occurs at the ends of words in Vietnamese; it is further compounded by the fact that there are no consonant clusters (i.e. sequences of consonants like ts, gz, sks, etc.) either. All of which means that both the grammar and the pronunciation of the plural will cause problems.

The possessive -s One of the ways English indicates possession is the possessive with "apostrophe s", as in phrases like John's book, the store's closing hours, your father's moustache and the razor's edge. The "apostrophe s", which is pronounced exactly the same as the plural s (with the -s, -z and -iz alternatives), gives the Vietnamese student the same problems in pronunciation. It gives him grammatical problems also, as the possessive in Vietnamese is expressed in a form closer to the English possessive construction with "of" as in the top of the table or the point of the story. The Vietnamese student will have no trouble mastering this "of" construction (notice that it doesn't involve suffixes), but he will probably try to use it in places where the "apostrophe s" must be used: John's book is ungrammatical as the book of John unless you're talking about the New Testament. Here's an example of a possessive phrase in Vietnamese:

Tôi cần cuốn* sách của ông Quang. 'I need Mr. Quang's book.'
'I' "need' 'piece' 'book' 'property' 'Mr. Quang'

The word của, which we have translated as "property" because it is a noun in Vietnamese, is nonetheless on a superficial level directly parallel to the English preposition "of". Vietnamese possessive phrases are, by the way, ambiguous in the same way that English possessives are: Mr. Quang's book, like cuốn sách của ông Quang, can mean "the book that Mr. Quang wrote",

*These cuốn's, which we keep translating as "piece", sometimes translate better as "the", as we will explain in the section on articles.

"the book that Mr. Quang owns", "the book in Mr. Quang's possession at the moment", and so on.

The -er comparative and -est superlative Vietnamese students will have trouble with sentences like John is taller than Bill and John is the tallest boy in the class, in that they will forget to put the -er and -est suffixes on the appropriate adjectives. The Vietnamese sentence which expresses the idea of the comparative is parallel to the English one, but without a suffix:

Minh cao hơn Thăng. 'Minh is taller than Thang.'
'Minh' 'tall' 'than' 'Thang'

Minh cao hơn hết ở trong lớp. 'Minh is taller than everyone in the class.'
'Minh' 'tall' 'than' 'all' 'at' 'inside' 'class'

(hơn, which we are translating as 'than', really means something like 'superior-to'; the sentence Minh hơn Thăng means 'Minh is superior to Thăng'.)

The superlative in Vietnamese is expressed either with hơn, as in the sentence above about Minh being taller than everyone, or with the word nhất, which translates roughly as 'number one', 'tops', or 'most':

Minh cao nhất lớp. 'Minh is the tallest in the class.'
'Minh' 'tall' 'tops' 'class'

-ly adverbs In Vietnamese, the same form of a word serves as both adjective and adverb: the word đẹp, for example, remains the same whether it is being used as an adjective 'pretty', or an adverb 'prettily':

Cô ấy đẹp. 'She is pretty.'
'she' 'pretty'

Cái đẹp mắc hơn. 'The pretty one is more expensive.'
'the' 'pretty' 'expensive' 'superior'

Nó vẽ đẹp. 'He draws prettily.'
'he' 'draw' 'pretty'

The Vietnamese learner of English will, correspondingly, forget to put the -ly suffix on his adverbs (or, in the case of adjectives like good,

forget to use the adverb form well), and come up with sentences like 'He draws pretty' or 'He sings good.'

In some dialects of English, sentences like 'He draws pretty.' and 'He sings good.' are perfectly all right; in other dialects, however, they are considered incorrect. To be on the safe side, the Vietnamese student should be taught to put the -ly suffix on his adverbs, so that he will be using adverbs "correctly" wherever he finds himself.

-ing forms used as nouns In English, we frequently convert verbs into nouns by tacking on the -ing suffix and proceeding as usual: sentences like Seeing is believing, Climbing mountains is dangerous, and I don't approve of his eating goldfish before dinner are examples of these -ing nouns (called gerunds by grammarians). In Vietnamese, verbs can be used as nouns without changing their form: the verb uong 'drink' can be used as a verb:

Tôi uống sữa. 'I drink milk.'
'I' 'drink' 'milk'

or it can be used as a noun:

Uống sữa là tôi đau bụng. 'Drinking milk gives me a stomach ache.'
'drink' 'milk' 'is' 'I' 'ache' 'stomach'

Here is another example, this time with the verb đi 'go' or 'leave':

Minh đi nhà thương. 'Minh is going to the hospital.'
'Minh' 'go' 'hospital'

Đi một ngày đàng, học một sàng khôn. 'Even a one-day journey is worth a basketful of wisdom.'
'go' 'one' 'day' 'road' 'learn' 'one' 'basket' 'wisdom'

(This last sentence is a famous proverb in Vietnamese.)

The Vietnamese learner of English will try to use verbs as nouns without putting the -ing suffix on, and produce sentences like Learn English is hard for 'Learning English is hard.' or I appreciate you send me some books for 'I would appreciate your sending me some books'.

-ing forms used as adjectives We also use the -ing suffix to change verbs into adjectives. In phrases like dancing bear and running water, the verbs

dance and run are changed to dancing and running via the -ing suffix, then used as adjectives modifying bear and water. In Vietnamese, verbs can function as adjectives, but - like verbs functioning as nouns - they do so without benefit of suffix. The verb chảy 'flow', for example, is an ordinary verb in the following sentence:

Nước chảy. 'Water flows.'
'water' 'flow'

but it can with no modification be used as an adjective:

Nước chảy sạch hơn nước đọng. 'Running water is cleaner than stagnant water.'
'water' 'flow' 'clean' 'superior' 'water' 'stagnant'

The Vietnamese student of English will have a tendency to use verbs as adjectives without putting the -ing suffix on; this lack of suffix, combined with problems of adjective placement (in Vietnamese, they go after the noun; in English, they go before) can lead to undecipherable sentences like Mothers do work very concerned about that problem. (What was meant here was 'Working mothers are very concerned about that problem' !)

B. Tenses

One of the most important features of the English language is its system of tenses. In just about every sentence, time relationships - whether present, past or future, in progress, already over with, and so on - are carefully indicated: with a suffix, an auxiliary or helping verb like have, be, or will, or a combination of suffix and auxiliary. An example of just part of the English tense system is given in the sentences below; note how the meaning of each sentence changes as the tenses are juggled.

I was eating breakfast when the package arrived.
I ate breakfast when the package arrived.
I had eaten breakfast when the package arrived.
I will be eating breakfast when the package arrives.
I will eat breakfast when the package arrives.
I will have eaten breakfast when the package arrives.

Native speakers of English can juggle tenses with the greatest of ease, and are generally unaware of the interactions between auxiliaries and suffixes

that produce the kinds of time relationships exemplified in the sentences above. Speakers of Vietnamese, on the other hand, find the English tense system very difficult indeed, because there is no one grammatical feature in Vietnamese which corresponds directly to it.

To begin with, any overt grammatical indication whether something is happening now, in the past or in the future is often completely lacking in a Vietnamese sentence; the situation alone tells the listener this type of information. The following sentence, for example, can mean either "I'm buying a sweater and looking for some boots," "I bought a sweater and looked for some boots," or "I will buy a sweater and look for some boots.":

Tôi	mua	áo len	và	kiếm	mua	giày bốt
'I'	'buy'	'sweater'	'and'	'look-for'	'buy'	'boot'

This sentence will have one or the other of the meanings given above depending on what has gone on previously in the conversation: if the speaker is talking about his shopping trip yesterday, it means "I bought..."; if he is discussing his plans for next Saturday morning, it means "I will buy..."; and if he is answering the question "What are you doing here at Macy's?" it means "I'm buying..."

Even when time is overtly indicated in a Vietnamese sentence, the means for doing so do not correspond to tenses in English. One of the ways of disambiguating a Vietnamese sentence like the one above involves the use of words and phrases like hôm qua 'yesterday', ngày mai 'tomorrow' or sáng mai, lúc 9 giờ 20 'tomorrow morning at 20 after 9'. Words and phrases like these function just like their counterparts in English. But in English, the time phrase and tense in a sentence must "agree" ('I will eat breakfast yesterday' is funny because a future verb occurs with a past time word), whereas in Vietnamese the verb form doesn't change, whatever the time word or phrases. A consequence of all this is that the Vietnamese learner of English will tend to leave tenses off his verbs, and produce sentences like 'Yesterday I buy a sweater', which, although it is perfectly understandable, is not correct.

The other way to be more specific about time in a Vietnamese sentence is to use one or the other of a series of words which behave - on a superficial level, at least - like the English auxiliaries can, may, will, should and so on. Some of these Vietnamese "auxiliaries" have to do with time, some

don't; in the following sentences, note how the meaning changes as one Vietnamese "auxiliary" is substituted for another:

Tôi [hay] uống nước trà. 'I often drink tea.'
'I' 'often' 'drink' 'tea'

Tôi [mới] uống nước trà. 'I just drank tea.'
'just'

Tôi [sắp] uống nước trà. 'I am about to drink tea.'
'about to'

Tôi [sẽ] uống nước trà. 'I intend to drink tea.'
'intend to'

Tôi [đã] uống nước trà. 'I drank tea.
'past'

Tôi [đang] uống nước trà. 'I am drinking tea.', 'I was drinking tea.'
'continue'

Tôi [cứ] uống nước trà. 'I drink tea anyway.'
'anyway'

Tôi [thường] uống nước trà. 'I usually drink tea.'
'usually'

Tôi [có] uống nước trà. 'I did drink tea.'
emphatic

The Vietnamese learner of English will have a tendency to equate English tenses with these "auxiliaries". Sometimes this will work out all right (the English future, for example, consists of the auxiliary will plus the verb with no suffixes; it is thus parallel to the sentences above in construction). Sometimes it won't work out all right (the English present perfect tense, as in 'I have eaten eggplant', involves not only the auxiliary have, but also the past participle eaten; its construction is not parallel to that in the sentences above, and will cause problems.)

There is another "auxiliary" in Vietnamese - the word rồi, which occurs after the verb (unlike the auxiliaries just discussed) and which indicates that the action of the verb took place prior to a given point in time. (In linguistic parlance, it is called a perfect aspect marker, and can be equated very, very roughly with our present or past perfect tenses.) Vietnamese students of English very often equate rồi with the English adverb already, and try to express a variety of past tenses by leaving the verb tenseless and tacking on already. Watch out for this, and be aware that the student who says "I go already" really means "I have gone", "I had gone", or "I went", and correct him accordingly.

To summarize, English tenses will cause problems on two major fronts. First, it is not necessary to indicate tense in most Vietnamese sentences, so the Vietnamese learner of English will have a tendency to leave tenses out of his English sentences. Second, there is nothing in Vietnamese which corresponds to the auxiliary + suffix combinations which comprise many English tenses, and so the Vietnamese learner of English will need extensive practice to get and keep these tenses straight.

C. be sentences

Sentences in which the verb is a form of be, like Goldfish are pretty and John is hungry, will give the Vietnamese learner of English trouble on two counts.

The first problem is that be is one of those inconsistencies we talked about on page 12: it is the only verb in the language with special forms for first, second and third person subjects (we say I am rather than I is, you are rather than you am, and so on). These alternations are thoroughly presented and drilled in ESL textbooks because they give all learners of English trouble; chances are that you will find the treatment of them in your textbook adequate for your students' needs.

The other problem with be sentences - and this one is a problem for Vietnamese speakers in particular - is that in the Vietnamese parallels of some English be sentences, the equivalent of be simply does not occur. To be specific, the Vietnamese equivalent of be (which is là) does not occur in sentences with predicate adjectives. (In case you don't remember, the word pretty functions as a predicate adjective in the sentence Goldfish are pretty!)

For example, the Vietnamese equivalent of the sentence "Minh is a student" is

Minh là học trò.
'Minh' 'be' 'student'

in which là, the equivalent of English be, occurs. (In this sentence, in both English and Vietnamese, học trò and student are functioning as predicate nouns.)

On the other hand, the Vietnamese equivalent of the sentence "Goldfish are pretty" is

Cá vàng đẹp.
'goldfish' 'pretty'

in which there is no là at all.

The upshot of these disappearing là's is that it will feel 'natural' to the Vietnamese student of English to leave out be, and to come up with sentences like "Goldfish pretty", or "John nice". This, combined with the is-am-are-was-were problem, means that the student will require extra work on be, especially with predicate adjectives.

(Incidentally, là is like full verbs in Vietnamese in that it can refer to present, past or future depending on context.)

D. Questions

Another area of difficulty for Vietnamese learners of English is English questions. There are two types of questions, from a grammatical point of view: yes-no questions (those which are answered by yes or no, like "Did John see the goldfish?") and what linguists call WH- questions (questions that involve words starting with wh like what, who, when, which and so on, e.g. "What did John see?"). Both types of questions involve rearranging the word order of the verb phrase, and therefore cause trouble; word order in Vietnamese does not change from statement to corresponding question.

yes-no questions Yes-no questions in English differ from their corresponding statements in that the first word of the verb phrase is moved to the beginning of the sentence. In the question which corresponds to the

statement "John will buy a goldfish", for example, the word will, which is the first element in the verb phrase will buy, is moved to the beginning of the question, to get "Will John buy a goldfish?".

If the verb phrase consists of only one word, as in, for example, the sentence "John eats goldfish," we English speakers conjure up a do with the appropriate tense, and move it up to the beginning, as in "Does John eat goldfish?". And if the verb phrase is one of the single-word forms of be, as in "John is a bit strange," we forget about the do and just move the be verb up to the beginning: "Is John a bit strange?"

Yes-no questions in Vietnamese are nowhere near so messy. They differ from their corresponding statements only in that the word không 'no, not' has been tacked on at the end of the sentence. Note that the following sentence and its corresponding question are exactly alike except for the không:

Minh ăn cá vàng. 'Minh eats goldfish.'
'Minh' 'eats' 'goldfish'

Minh ăn cá vàng không? 'Does Minh eat goldfish?'
'Minh' 'eats' 'goldfish' 'no'

WH- questions WH- questions in English differ from their corresponding statements in two ways: first, a WH- word (like who, what, when, where, why, which) replaces the appropriate element in the statement, and is moved to the beginning of the sentence; second, the verb phrase is split up as it is for yes-no questions. The WH- question "What has John bought?", for example, differs from the corresponding statement "John has bought a goldfish," in that first, the phrase a goldfish is replaced by the WH- word what and moved to the beginning of the sentence; and the has of the verb phrase has been relocated in front of the subject John.

Messy as all this is, it gets worse: if the WH- word is the subject of the sentence, the verb phrase is left alone, so that the question corresponding to the statement "John ate my goldfish," is "Who ate my goldfish?", instead of "Did who eat my goldfish?", as it would be if English grammar were consistent.

Vietnamese WH- questions are much more straightforward. In them, the

WH- word (like cái gì 'what', tại sao 'why', ai 'who' and so on) (which are of course not WH- words because they don't start with wh, but this is not the time to quibble over details) simply replaces the appropriate element in the sentence, and everything else is left as is. Note that the following statement and a corresponding WH- question differ only in that the word cái gì 'what' appears in place of the phrase cá vàng 'goldfish':

Minh	ăn	cá vàng.	'Minh eats goldfish.'
'Minh'	'eat'	'goldfish'	
Minh	ăn	cái gì?	'What does Minh eat?'
'Minh'	'eat'	'what'	

The upshot of these differences in the structure of questions in Vietnamese and English is that it will be hard for Vietnamese learners of English to get used to the differences in word order between English statements and questions. They will need extra practice on the question forms of each tense, as well as on questions themselves.

(A word about whom. Note that in the previous discussion of questions the use of whom was not mentioned. It was deliberately ignored for several reasons, the most compelling of which is that in everyday conversational English, whom is simply not used by the vast majority of English speakers, however educated they might be. The time to teach whom is after the student has learned spoken English, and when he is learning the special structures and conventions of expository writing.)

E. Negatives

Negative statements in English will be difficult for Vietnamese students for much the same reasons that questions are: negatives involve the same breaking-up of the verb phrase, the same use of the conjured-up do, and the same irregular behavior of the verb be.

For example, the negative of the sentence John will buy a guppy is John will not buy a guppy; the negative word not has been inserted between the elements of the verb phrase will buy. Negatives of sentences with only one word in their verb phrases, like John bought a guppy, are formed by conjuring up the do, attaching to it the appropriate tense, and inserting it along with

not before the verb: John did not buy a guppy. Except when the single-word verb phrase is one of the forms of be, as in Guppies are too small to eat; in that case, the not is simply put after the be form: Guppies are not too small to eat.

As you must have guessed by now, none of these shenanigans are involved in the Vietnamese negative. One makes a Vietnamese sentence negative simply by inserting the word không 'not' in front of the verb. For example, the sentence

Minh mua cá mặt trăng 'Minh bought a guppy.'
'Minh' 'buy' 'guppy'

has the following negative:

Minh không mua cá mặt trăng. 'Minh didn't buy a guppy.'
'Minh' 'not' 'buy' 'guppy'

The only exception is with sentences in which the verb is là (which, you remember from page 26, is equivalent to be); in this case, the phrase không phải 'not correct' is inserted before the là to negate the sentence, so that the negative of the sentence

Cá mặt trăng* là một loại cá vô dụng. 'Guppies are useless fish.'
'guppy' 'be' 'useless fish'

is

Cá mặt trăng không phải là một loại cá vô dụng.
'guppy' 'not correct' 'be' 'useless fish'

Because the English negative is so much more involved than the Vietnamese negative, it will take the Vietnamese student some time to get used to forming English negatives properly. He should be given extra practice in forming the negatives of all the tenses.

A word on contractions: most ESL texts present contractions of not, as in haven't, didn't, aren't and so on, at the same time as - if not before - they present the non-contracted forms. They do so for the very sound reason

*The staff at the National Indochinese Clearinghouse is not sure that cá mặt trăng is really a guppy. We feel that it is close enough, however; besides, this is a bulletin on language, not fish.

that in all but the stiffest, most formal speech and writing, contractions of the negative are universally used. If you don't teach the contracted forms (which are pronounced quite differently from the non-contracted ones), your students won't recognize them in ordinary conversation, and for a while will be terribly confused.

F. Articles

The use of the articles a/an and the is one of the most difficult aspects of English to teach, primarily because it is one of those areas of English grammar that we don't understand well enough to describe precisely. We know that in general a/an is used when we are referring to one instance of something or someone indefinite or general, as in John ate a guppy; we also know that in general if we want to refer to more than one something or someone indefinite or general, we use the bare plural of the noun with no article, as in John eats guppies; and we know that if we want to refer to someone or something definite or specific, we use the article the with both singular and plural nouns, as in John ate the guppy belonging to his sister, and John ate the guppies belonging to his sister. We can't, however, explain the numerous exceptions to these "rules", like the sentence The goldfish is a member of the carp family, in which the definite article the is used even though the sentence is talking about all goldfish, and not just one goldfish in particular.

To further complicate the picture, there are many nouns in English (called mass nouns or non-count nouns) which can't occur with a/an or in the bare plural. The nouns water, chalk, furniture, soap and milk are examples: note that we cannot say Bring me a soap or Bring me soaps. We can't use numbers with these mass nouns, either: Bring me three soaps is ungrammatical.

Vietnamese makes a distinction between general and specific, but not through the use of words parallel to a/an and the. It utilizes, instead, a system which is in many respects parallel to the behavior of English mass nouns. Look at the following sentences with the mass noun chalk, which translate almost word for word between the languages:

Tôi cần phấn. 'I need chalk.'
'I' 'need' 'chalk'

Tôi cần một viên phấn. 'I need a piece of chalk.'
'I' 'need' 'one' 'piece' 'chalk'

Tôi cần ba viên phấn. 'I need three pieces of chalk.'
'I' 'need' '3' 'piece' 'chalk'

Now compare these Vietnamese sentences with the ones on pages 9 and 10; you will see that the word sách 'book' behaves the same way as phấn 'chalk'.

The word viên in the preceding sentences, and the word cuốn in the sentences about the book, are members of a group of words sometimes called classifiers. Just as the mass nouns in English require a "classifier" when bits of them are being talked about (for example a piece of chalk or cake, a glass of water, a cube or block of ice, a bar of soap and so on) so do nearly all the nouns of Vietnamese require classifiers.

This use of classifiers in Vietnamese, and the fact that they parallel in many respects the behavior of mass nouns in English, results in a tendency on the part of Vietnamese learners of English to assume that all nouns in English are mass nouns. He will say, for example, "Minh ate guppy" when he means "Minh ate a guppy" or "Minh ate guppies", and he might even supply classifiers where they shouldn't be. (And produce sentences on the order of no-tickee-no-laundly sentences like "You want one piece shirt?") (Chinese has classifiers too!)

Afterword

We hope that the preceding discussion will help you understand better some of the problems your Vietnamese students will have in learning the structures of English. Your particular students might not find some of the areas we covered problematic; if they speak French well, for example, they will not have so much trouble with English tenses, because French has a complicated system of tenses too. Conversely, your particular students might come to grief over a structure we haven't mentioned; in this case, asking a Vietnamese who speaks English well to translate one of the problem sentences into Vietnamese, and then to translate it back into English for you word for word, will often give you a good idea why the structure is causing problems. This is what we have done throughout the bulletin with our examples in Vietnamese. If you have no way of

contacting a Vietnamese who knows English, you can always call the National Indochinese Clearinghouse; the toll-free number is listed on the front page of this bulletin.

Once you understand why your students make a particular mistake, it will be much easier for you to plan your drills and other classroom activities so that he can learn more efficiently the correct way to express himself. For example, if you understand that when your student says "Minh ate goldfish, no?" he is translating and really means "Did Minh eat a goldfish?", you can correct him accordingly, rather than assuming - as many people do - that he was trying to say "Minh ate a goldfish, didn't he?" And having corrected him correctly, you will also realize that he needs more work on questions, and plan your class time to fit it in.

We also hope that reading this bulletin has made you more interested in the Vietnamese language. If you would like to learn more about the structure of Vietnamese sentences, there are brief sketches in most Vietnamese-English phrasebooks (e.g. Vương Gia Thụy's Vietnamese in a Nutshell, New York: Funk and Wagnall's, 1975.) Unfortunately, there are no extensive descriptions of Vietnamese syntax written for the non-linguist, but if you have had training in linguistics, or know a linguist who can explain them to you, you might find the following books useful.

Khai, Bửu. A Formalized Syntax of Vietnamese. Unpub. doctoral dissertation, Georgetown University, 1972.

Phạm Trọng Lệ. A Comparative Study of Difference Between English and Vietnamese Structural Patterns of High Frequency. Singapore: RELC, 1970. (RELC 4th Four-Month Course)

Ross, Marion W. Questions in Vietnamese. Unpub. doctoral dissertation, Cornell University, 1971.

Shum, Shu-ying. A Transformational Study of Vietnamese Syntax. Unpub. doctoral dissertation, Indiana University, 1965.

Thompson, Laurence C. A Vietnamese Grammar. Seattle, Wash.: University of Washington Press, 1965.

Trần Khắc Lâm. A Comparison of English and Vietnamese Adjectives. Singapore: RELC, 1974. (RELC 11th Four-Month Course)